



INTELLECTUAL OUTPUT-1

COUNTRY SPECIFIC TEXT: BELGIUM

State of inclusive education in Flanders

This chapter sketches the situation of inclusivity within Flemish education, the northern Dutch speaking region of Belgium. It first explores the landscape of educational inclusivity in terms of ethnic and racial diversity, then it looks at the ways in which learners with disabilities and special needs are integrated into education, and lastly, the chapter discusses the degree to which the education system accommodates for differences in gender and sexual orientation amongst learners. Each of the three sections provide a brief timeline of policies around inclusivity, they discuss the main concerns and challenges which learners of different backgrounds, abilities, and groups face, in addition to providing statistical insights and notable findings from the past and recent literature on the effects of existing educational policies and measures. Examples of public and private institutions and initiatives that are assuming the challenge of ensuring inclusivity within the education system are also provided. The chapter ends with a presentation of the results of a questionnaire completed by 150 university students and 76 instructors working in higher education in Flanders, Belgium. The questionnaire, completed between April 2021 and February 2022 by students and staff from different faculties across higher education institutions in Flanders, explores student and staff perceptions on educational inclusivity for ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse groups, for those with disabilities and special needs, and for those across different gender and sexual orientation groups.

1. Introduction

The freedom of education provides every legal resident of Belgium the right to establish a school that fulfils their intended educational goals. The freedom of school choice gives parents the right to both denominational and undenominational education offered by both public and private entities. Once pupils meet the school admission criteria, they may not be denied admission. Since 1989, education in Belgium has been the responsibility of the three linguistic communities. In Flanders, it is organized by the Flemish government. Education is compulsory for all children residing in Belgium. Compulsory education starts at age five and ends at age eighteen, or upon completion of the secondary school diploma.

The case for inclusivity in Flemish education rests in the extent to which the education structure has shaped the education system into one that is segregated. Nicaise (2019) argues that social inequalities in educational outcomes are aggravated by academic segregation. Inclusive education may be a mitigator of the inequalities in educational outcomes in Flanders. This nudges this chapter's conversation into a direction which explores the existing structures,

policies, and initiatives concerning inclusivity in Flemish education with a goal of reinforcing the pillars of inclusivity.

This chapter sketches the situation of inclusivity within Flemish education. It first explores the landscape of educational inclusivity in terms of ethnic and racial diversity, then it looks at the ways in which learners with disabilities and special needs are integrated into education, and lastly, the chapter discusses the degree to which the education system accommodates for differences in gender and sexual orientation amongst learners. Each of the three sections provide a brief timeline of policies around inclusivity, discuss the main concerns and challenges which learners of different backgrounds, abilities, and groups face and provide statistical insights and notable findings from the past and recent literature on the effects of existing educational policies and measures. Examples of public and private institutions and initiatives that are assuming the challenge of ensuring inclusivity within the education system are also presented. The chapter ends with a presentation of the results of a questionnaire completed by 150 university students and 76 staff members from different faculties within higher education across Flanders. The questionnaire, completed between April 2021 and February 2022, explores student and staff perceptions on educational inclusivity for ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse groups, for those with disabilities and special needs, and for those across different gender and sexual orientation groups.

2. Ethnic and Racial Diversity

2.1. Diversity in Flemish education

A distinction may be made between ethnic/racial diversity and cultural diversity. The former relates to ethnic and racial differences while the latter pertains to differences in socio-economic status, education levels, or geographical and regional origins. In Flanders, disparities in education levels or socio-economic status are often rooted in the ethnic and racial origins. For this reason, this chapter has chosen to integrate its discussion on inclusive education in Flanders with regards to ethnic and racial diversity, and cultural diversity.

Flanders has high levels of inequalities in educational outcomes between immigrants and natives (OECD, 2006). Immigrant students experience lower levels of sense of belonging and happiness at school than their native peers, with a 9.8 percentage point difference between first-generation and non-immigrant students (OECD, 2015). Additionally, immigrant students performed worse than their native peers in Belgium in mathematics, reading and problem solving (OECD, 2015).

Ethnic and racial inclusivity in Flanders has gained increasing significance at a time when immigration is driving change in the regional demographic landscape. Inclusivity is of special concern for education given that amongst the under 18s, the non-ethnic population is greater than the ethnic Belgian population in cities such as Antwerp, Ghent and Hasselt (SVR, 2012). Following the arrival of the first wave of immigrants to Belgium after the Second World War, it was assumed that integration of immigrant children into the local community and educational system would ensue, therefore scant attention was paid to policies that would actively facilitate this process (Van Praag, 2013). When it became apparent that immigrant adults and children faced an uphill battle towards inclusion, several schemes that focused on fostering inclusivity were integrated into the Flemish educational system.

2.2. Barriers

The Eurydice report by Noorani et. al (2019) provides an overview of policy measures seeking to integrate students from migrant backgrounds into schools. Measures outlined in the report which may enhance ethnic and racial inclusivity in Flanders include collection of nationality data, place of birth, and languages spoken at home to better direct policy making.

The report also highlights several challenges which are limiting the extent to which the Flemish education system is ethnically and racially inclusive. Free school choice and early ability tracking perpetuate inequalities in educational outcomes. Intraschool diversity in Flanders remains low whereby pupils of migrant backgrounds often attend schools with lower average performances (Jacobs et al., 2009). Given the freedom of school choice, the government has limited authority to impose policies that actively foster greater racial and ethnic heterogeneity within schools. School segregation is fuelled by early ability tracking which is disadvantageous for newcomers to Flanders given that factors such as language may hinder academic performance, thus leading to an overrepresentation of immigrant pupils in vocational tracks (Sterckx, 2006). For instance, given that students attend classes while separated from the non-newcomers throughout the entire school day, this policy may foster ethnic and racial exclusion rather than inclusion. The report states that “preparatory classes/lessons [for language learning] have also been found to hinder integration by separating migrant students from their native-born peers” (Ravn et al., 2018, p. 15). Furthermore, in reception schools, many newcomers are confronted with a gap between their skills and knowledge and the academic expectations of mainstream education (Ravn et al., 2018). Between 2009 to 2014, there was a 21.5% to 34.2% re-entry rate into reception education for students who were due to enter mainstream education. Reception education also has high absenteeism with many students not attending classes (Ravn et al., 2018).

In Flanders, students of immigrant backgrounds face barriers with regards to access to education given that they cannot practice the same rights as native-born students. For instance, participation in compensatory education such as vocational training is out of reach for those above 18 years of age without a valid residence permit. In Flanders, non-Dutch speaking students have a low sense of school belonging and the index measuring this for Flanders is one of the highest in the 15 countries participating in the survey (Noorani et al. 2019). In Flanders, immigrant youth face more bullying victimization than non-immigrants (Stevens et al., 2020). Furthermore, pupils from reception schools often face bullying from those in mainstream schools once they join mainstream education (Ravn et al., 2018).

2.3.Action plans

To face the existing situation and the barriers, multiple policy initiatives and action plans have been developed. In the 1980s, immigrant children could take classes in their native languages alongside Dutch language classes (Friant et al., 2012). In 1989, the first set of Priority Education Policies (PEPs) were introduced, *Onderwijsvoorrrangsbeleid* in Dutch. They targeted children from immigrant backgrounds, and Dutch language fluency, parental inclusion into the school community, and intercultural education were prioritized (Karsten, 2006). In the 1990s, when the disparities between the educational performance of natives and non-native students became apparent (Friant et al. 2012), ethnicity became a point for discussion (Van Damme, 2006). Factors such as cultural differences in educational perceptions and racial discrimination pushed for greater efforts for ethnic and racial inclusivity within education in Flanders (Thomas, 2013).

In 1993, an anti-discrimination convention was established. This sought to ensure that schools pursued an active admissions policy whereby students belonging to ethnic minorities were admitted to any school regardless of the school’s pedagogical and ideological foundations (Karsten, 2006). However, this convention perpetuated segregation (Janssens et al., 2000).

In 2002, given the limited success of the Priority Education Policies, the Equal Education Opportunities Policy, *Gelijke Onderwijskansen* in Dutch, was introduced. It targeted disadvantaged students from both immigrant and non-immigrant backgrounds (D’Inverno, De Witte and Smet, 2021; Mergoni and De Witte, 2021). Once the percentage of underprivileged

students reached 10 or 25 percent (depending on the age group), students received additional funding.

School-age newcomers are placed in mainstream classes in primary education, however, schools can direct those with insufficient Dutch skills towards reception education. Reception schools, *Onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige kinderen (OKAN)* in Dutch, serve to enhance social integration of newcoming non-Dutch speaking children (*onderwijs.vlaanderen*). The objective of these programs is to teach children Dutch. In primary education, schools can integrate non-Dutch speaking students into existing classes or create a separate class for them. In secondary education, students are placed in separate classes. Pupils from migrant backgrounds moving from preparatory to mainstream education receive additional guidance and support. Language baths are another component of reception education which provide a yearlong intense language program for children with the goal of integrating them into regular classes upon completion of the program (*onderwijs.vlaanderen*). In secondary education, the reception year gives importance to both linguistic and civic integration. A similar scheme is offered to vocational education students with the added component of preparing students for the labour market. Although OKAN serves to address inclusivity through its programs, questions can be raised concerning the extent to which reception education provides an ethnically and racially inclusive environment. For instance, its eligibility criteria may exclude students who may need Dutch language support but are not newcomers to Belgium. Furthermore, language baths cannot be refused by parents.

Currently, initiatives are being taken by the Agency for Integration (*Agentschappen Integratie en Inburgering en Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur* in Dutch) to enhance educational inclusivity. The Agency for Integration awards grants projects that cater for inclusivity. These are focused on Dutch language proficiency, involvement of parents in their children's education, and increasing the participation rate in preschool education of immigrant children (*Integratiebeleid.vlaanderen*). NedBox, launched by the Flemish Civil Integration Agency, provides non-Dutch speaking adults an online platform to learn and practice Dutch. Two other projects include one which targets unaccompanied 16-18-year-old newcomers to Belgium by supporting them in their educational journeys, and the other program provides Dutch language classes and childcare support for low-literate women.

The Horizontal Integration and Equal Opportunities Policy Plan 2020-2024 (*Het Horizontaal Integratie- en Gelijke Kansenbeleidsplan 2020-2024* in Dutch) is a recent policy plan for enhancing inclusivity through equal opportunities and participatory citizenship. This vision is set by both the Equal Opportunities Decree (*gelijkekansendecreet* in Dutch) and the Civic Integration Decree (*inburgeringsdecreet* in Dutch) and seeks to facilitate integration of newcomers through empowerment. Starting from 2020, needs will be assessed annually, and action plans will be created. The aim is to increase evidence-informed policy making by providing continuous data measuring and monitoring to assess the effectiveness of different interventions.

Furthermore, revision of the attainment targets for secondary education is called for, to include citizenship education and learning to live in a multicultural society. Within the realm of sports, one of the policy plans call for greater ethnic diversity in the sport sector's governing bodies. The policy plan also calls for an exploration of the barriers to participation in leisure, sports, and cultural for those of immigrant backgrounds. Inviting immigrant youth who participated in sports and cultural activities to share personal stories is another strategy which could communicate the accessibility and inclusivity of leisure activities. This is part of a campaign titled *Let's Change the Narrative* which serves to counter stereotypes that exist towards the marginalized in society.

Another component of the 2020-2024 Equal Opportunities policy plan is the setting up of a Flemish equality body (*Vlaams gelijkheidsorgaan* in Dutch) to address discrimination in

Flanders. Effective monitoring as well as establishing support hotlines for those facing discrimination are outlined as part of a vision for an ethnically inclusive society.

The 2020-2024 Equal Opportunities policy plan identifies the Dutch language as a strong binding thread in Flanders. The objectives comprise of eliminating barriers to learning Dutch for newcomers, improving accessibility of digital learning platforms, and ensuring that all domains of working, living, and leisure are included in language policy measures. Policies aim to meet the linguistic needs of both adults and children. For instance, providing children who speak a foreign language at home with the opportunity to improve their Dutch through locally organised summer schools serve as one of the measures targeting inclusivity through education (*Actie 1.2: Nederlands van leerlingen versterken via zomerscholen* in Dutch from the 2020-2024 Equal Opportunities policy plan). Fostering online communication and discussion amongst youth from different backgrounds is another target aiming to build bridges between different groups. The Houses of the Child (*Huizen van het Kind* in Dutch) provide childcare, preventive health care and parental support to newcomers.

2.4.Labour market integration

Immigrants' labour market integration through lifelong learning and recognition of foreign qualifications is another priority highlighted by the 2020-2024 Equal Opportunities policy plan. Within the education sector, immigrants and asylum seekers who were teachers in their home countries are offered professional development to facilitate their professional integration into the Flemish education labour¹.

Currently in Flanders, to achieve greater ethnic and racial inclusivity through youth work, the Ministers of Youth and Society have cooperated in implementing several projects, starting from March 2021, that aim to serve this end. Under the name of Liaison Ambassadors for Youth Work (*Verbindingsambassadeurs voor het Jeugdwerk* in Dutch), the following are examples of projects that seek to make leisure available for all children and youth regardless of background. The 'Connect Yourself! Program' aims to increase the participation of vulnerable youth and those from immigrant backgrounds in local youth center activities and sports clubs. Project *DNA- De Nieuwe Animatoren* gives young people the opportunity to become animators or apply to internships within youth work. A project by *PSC- Open Huis* targets unaccompanied newcomers to Belgium between 17 to 21 years of age by organizing opportunities for participation in youth work. Programs such as *Navigate You(th)* in TARR focus on youth work to facilitate the integration of children and young people into society through schemes such as linguistic support. A comprehensive list of all the current projects can be found in the Annex A (*integratiebeleid.vlaanderen*).

2.5.Teachers and school language

The Flemish school context may be characterized by ethnocentric monolingualism whereby children of immigrant backgrounds are encouraged to adopt Dutch and limit the use of their mother tongue under the guise of integration (Agirdag, 2009). This issue is of concern given that over 50 % of both first- and second-generation immigrant students in Belgium do not speak Dutch at home (OECD, 2015). Agirdag advocates for linguistic pluralism to help shape a Flemish learning environment that is inclusive. Agirdag proposes practices that cater to the needs of the multicultural and multilingual Flemish school setting. For instance, pupils and parents can be encouraged to share their mother tongues with their peers and teachers through posters and presentations.

The importance of including teachers in efforts towards greater ethnic and racial diversity in education should not be overlooked. The findings from Agirdag et al. (2016)

¹ European strategic partnership ITTS: <http://itts-europe.org/>

highlights the importance of having more teachers from ethnic minorities teaching in Flemish schools for provision of education that is culturally inclusive. International Teachers for Tomorrow's School (ITTS) is at the forefront of these efforts by facilitating the professional integration of teachers from foreign backgrounds into European educational systems. Belgium is one of the seven countries participating in the ITTS project (<http://itts-europe.org/>). Teachers of refugee backgrounds who are newcomers to Europe often face barriers as they begin life anew. These barriers range from facing linguistic, cultural, and religious differences, in addition to institutional, bureaucratic, and structural barriers in the form of unrecognized qualifications, different training backgrounds and different educational and professional requirements by schools in the host communities. Flanders's efforts to help teachers overcome these obstacles are showcased through the partnerships of one of its key universities, KU Leuven, in the ITTS program. The support schemes include transnational stocktaking, development of support materials for teachers, intercultural education, and internationalization. Re-qualification programs organized by the universities participating in ITTS are also available. Through these programs, universities participating in the ITTS project, such as KU Leuven in Flanders, are making efforts to address the needs of the multicultural landscapes of local schools through innovating education and teacher-training programs to ensure that education delivery and provision is inclusive of teachers of all ethnicities.

3. Disabilities and Special Needs

Inclusivity in education for students with disabilities has emerged as a key talking point in Flanders. Flanders has the highest percentage of students in special education in Europe. 6 % of students are in Flemish special education schools compared to the European average of 1.5-2 % (*klasse.be*). However, inclusive education is not only about including children with disabilities in a mainstream school; inclusive education should allow students to fulfil their potential by receiving quality education *while* in a mainstream school.

3.1. Action plans

In Flanders, several schemes have been devised to align with this vision of educational inclusivity. Since ratifying the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009, equal opportunities for participation in society without barriers has been a right for all disabled persons in Belgium. As underlined by the equal opportunities decree of June 2002, special education is not obligatory for any child and a referral is necessary for admission (European Agency, 2003). All children have the right to attend a regular school with the option of receiving support through different accommodations.

Special nursery and primary education provide medical, psychological, social, and educational support to supplement the learning needs of students with disabilities. Special secondary education provides students for whom mainstream education was ineffective in addressing learning needs and achieving learning outcomes. Integrated secondary education combines mainstream and special education (Education in Flanders, 2008). The Flemish education system also makes learning support available to students who need it. Students may be grouped according to their learning needs to receive additional support. For children whose disabilities make it impossible for them to attend school, home schooling is an option once a referral has been made by education inspectors (*onderwijsinspectie* in Dutch) (*onderwijs.vlaanderen.be*).

The M-decree of September 2014 advocates for participation of disabled children in mainstream education rather than segregating them through special education. The support ranges from the provision of basic care for students following the mainstream school curriculum

to more individualized support in the form of creating an Individually Adapted Curriculum where students have the choice of enrolling in mainstream or special education.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is based on making education accessible to every student irrespective of their disabilities. Schools can accommodate students with disabilities through adapting teaching methods, tools, and evaluation schemes. Importance is placed on effective communication pathways with parents. To access special education, students need a referral report from the mainstream school they attended whereby the Pupil Guidance Centre (*Centra voor Leerlingbegeleiding (CLB)* in Dutch) first verifies whether the school took all measures necessary to accommodate the student concerned. Students with disabilities can also re-enter mainstream education after attending special education. These principles make it impossible for students to be streamed into special education solely based on socio-economic background or because they were born with or developed a disability.

Individualized support schemes are another example of how students with special needs are supported in Flemish education. Previously, special needs students received a fixed amount of extra instruction hours. However, this model has been replaced and students are currently eligible for receiving more flexible support schemes depending on their needs (*onderwijs.vlaanderen.be*).

Another support model, introduced in September 2018, approaches special needs not as a medical issue but as a need for extra care. Support is situated above diagnosis. Students' educational needs are discussed together with parents, teachers and the *CLB* and a support plan is created to accompany students throughout the school year. Students are evaluated annually and the prerequisite of attending 9 months of special education to be eligible for support is no longer needed. All students with intellectual, motor, and audio-visual, impairments are eligible for support.

The M-decree of inclusive education is based on 'mainstream education first' for all special needs students. However, this trajectory leads towards several shortcomings. For instance, the focus of enrolling special needs learners into mainstream schools has raised a concern for whether special needs pupils are able to receive optimal academic and non-academic care in a mainstream education (*inclusion-europe.eu*). The M-decree may have overlooked the importance of improving the quality of special education in place of a focus on promoting mainstream education. For teachers teaching in special needs schools, the M-decree sparked fears of job loss.

From September 2022, the Flemish Government will be using a renewed framework, the Decree on Learning Support (*het decreet leersteun* in Dutch) which builds on the M-decree (*onderwijs.vlaanderen*). This decree reinstates mainstream education as the primary choice for students with disabilities whereby students would only be referred to special education in special cases. It promotes 'special education if needed, inclusive education if possible' (*European-agency.org*). The emphasis is on enhancing care for special education students in mainstream schools through support for learners and teachers. There are several objectives of the intervention. First, learning support centers will form a learning support network whereby schools can choose the center that they would like to collaborate with. Due to the new decree's focus on care, learning assistants will be given additional attention and support. Fostering mobility between mainstream and special education is another priority area and this seeks to enable exchange of information, expertise, and the educational responsibilities depending on learner needs. Furthermore, the new decree seeks to foster greater participation of special needs learners in Flemish tests and improve the quality of special education through pedagogical counseling services and CLBs. Under the new decree, schools may reject admission of pupils not capable of following the mainstream curriculum. This decree also recognizes gifted learners as special needs pupils and it seeks to provide support for teachers to help gifted learners achieve their potential.

3.2. Teaching practices

The M-decree has innovated classroom teaching. Co-teaching between special education teachers and teachers in mainstream schools is an example of such a development (*klasse.be*). Co-teaching provides special needs students with individualized support and instruction while attending mainstream schools. It also provides mainstream schoolteachers with support from specialized teachers.

The broad care policy (*breed zorgbeleid* in Dutch) has promoted efforts in redesigning physical classroom spaces. *Klasse.be*, an official Flemish government website, is an education magazine. In one of its articles, it discusses several innovations which local teachers have made to shape their classes into more inclusive spaces. For instance, one primary school director suggests that every classroom should have a quiet space for overstimulated students. Another teacher suggests using visual aids to facilitate learning for visual impaired students. Regarding assessments, a student counsellor suggests shortening of exam lengths to enable students with learning or physical disabilities to complete the exam.

Measures such as the M-decree have led to greater neurodiversity² in classrooms since student enrolments in mainstream education increased. To help teachers manage the behavioural problems which they may encounter in their classrooms as a result of this, two Flemish researchers have developed the ‘TOPspel project’. Teachers work with students on behaviour, attitude, and communication whereby they agree on a task or new behaviour, students receive a star if they achieve the task or lose a star if they do not. Teams with at least one star receive a reward (*klasse.be*).

A study by EASNIE (2018) revealed that inclusive education for students with special needs enhanced their prospects for social inclusion and employment. Being educated in an inclusive setting also increases the likelihood of financial independence, increases opportunities for participation in leisure and sports and leads to greater chances for social interaction. The ripple effects of inclusive education justify the need for efforts to ensure that measures are implemented, measured, and evaluated.

4. Gender and Sexual Orientation

When it comes to educational inclusivity with regards to gender and sexual orientation, the Flemish landscape is painted in a cautiously optimistic light. Following a trajectory of progress, Flanders has gained a favourable reputation as a region with a liberal outlook towards gender and sexual orientation differences. In this chapter, a distinction is made between gender inclusivity and sexual orientation inclusivity. The former, covered in section 3.1, pertains to equality of opportunities and participation in society for all genders. The latter, covered in section 3.2, concerns equality of treatment of people of all sexual orientations.

4.1. Gender

Gender-based violence is underreported in Belgium due to fear of blame, shame, and gender-related stereotypes stigmatizing experiences of violence. For instance, in 2014, 78 % of women did not report acts of serious violence and in 2010, 39 % of men were reluctant to report violence committed by their partners (NAP 2015-2019). This indicates that gender inequality continues to permeate Belgian society and necessitates for greater efforts in educating the public on gender-based prejudice which may be rooted in gender inequality. National policies, laws, school curricula, or the general public’s attitude towards gender are all factors through which this can be achieved.

² Neurodiversity is the acceptance of neurological differences as norms rather than as deficits.

Tackling gender inequality is important because it risks breeding systematic and institutional discrimination, oppression, and gender-based violence. Since 2001, under the guidance of national action plans (NAP), there have been joint efforts between the federal government and the three communities to tackle gender-based violence. The Institute for the Equality of Women and Men has played an important role through its contribution to the policy plans to ensure that they serve as a basis for addressing issues of gender-based discrimination.

Gender inequalities may also stem from childbearing responsibilities. In Flanders, children of immigrant backgrounds are less likely to attend kindergarten. Instead, care is provided by mothers. Therefore, schemes which encourage parents of immigrant backgrounds to enrol their children into organized childcare would relieve women of childbearing responsibilities and pave way for further education or work. This is not to imply that women should be enticed into choosing personal education or career goals over childcare. It is merely a suggestion to ensure that women have a fair chance of participation in education or work.

4.1.1. Labour market

One of the priority areas of the Equal Opportunities Policy Plan for 2020-2024 lies in integration of underrepresented immigrants into the Flemish local labour market. Differences in gender roles exacerbate this underrepresentation. For instance, employment prospects for women of migrant background, particularly for non-EU-15 migrants, remains low and this may be traced to gender (OECD, 2008), with only one third of immigrant women employed, Flanders has the highest rate of immigrant women out of employment amongst OECD countries. While the employment rates for women from the EU-15 countries have gotten closer to that of natives since 1980s, the rate of unemployment has risen for non-EU-15 immigrant women (OECD, 2008). The mean duration of unemployment for immigrant women in Flanders is 33.7 months, for second generation immigrant women it is 18.9 months, while for native women it is 4.3 months (SONAR). For men, the figures are 9.9 months, 3.1 months, and 4.5 months (SONAR). One of the factors underlying immigrant women's low employment rate in Flanders is the lack of incentives for work for low qualified married women. As noted by the OECD's 2008 report:

“...in no other OECD country (with the exception of Iceland) are the net replacement rates for the second earner of a married couple with both earning about two-thirds the average production wage as high as in Belgium (OECD, 2004; see also OECD, 2005b). As a result, incentives to work are very limited for less-qualified married women – whether they are native- or foreign-born. To the degree that foreign qualifications are discounted on the labour market, this could also explain low employment for somewhat more qualified immigrant women” (p.68).

Of particular concern are women who are of Moroccan or Tunisian background (OECD, 2008), including those who are second generation immigrants. Disparities in education levels perpetuate this whereby immigrant women often have either low education levels or have degrees from abroad that are not recognized in Flanders (OECD, 2008). These factors may then spiral into either ineligibility for work due to unrecognized skills, lack of skills, or low expected wages.

4.1.2. General action plans

In January 2007, Belgium adopted the Gender Mainstreaming Law whereby a gender equality perspective was integrated in areas of federal policymaking to ensure that policies are gender neutral prior to coming into effect. This preventive approach is aimed towards screening policies so that they do not become sources for gender discrimination. Prevention, , of gender-

based discrimination has been at the forefront of Flanders's efforts towards gender equality with schools.

The 2015-2019 National Action Plan to Combat all Forms of Gender-Based Violence covers issues ranging from forced marriages to honour-based violence, sexual violence and prostitution. This policy plan focuses on education as a tool to achieve greater gender equality through increasing awareness on gender-based discrimination and violence. The policy measures include educational campaigns, integration of educational material on gender equality in curricula, and ensuring that sports, leisure, and cultural activities promote the participation of all. Gender-based violence and discrimination are educational concerns as much as they are social, political, and economic concerns. This is evident through the means with which the behaviour of perpetrators of gender-based violence is corrected through educational programs in order to lower the risk of re-offending.

Several schemes may be proposed to mitigate the gender inequalities that have risen due to disparities in educational attainment. The 'living labs' project (*inburgering op maat voor laaggeletterde vrouwen met jonge kinderen* in Dutch) targets immigrant women with low literacy levels and with young children and provides them with an integrated programme which offers Dutch language courses in addition to childcare and education support (integratiebeleid.vlaanderen.be).

Traineeships and careers agencies have had a positive impact on second generation women's transition to the labour market. Training programs that target immigrant women equip them with skills and knowledge to enhance employability as well as streamlining the recognition of foreign educational qualifications. NARIC-Vlaanderen plays an active role in the recognition of foreign qualifications as well as legalizing Flemish educational qualifications, and providing information on the Flemish education system (naricvlaanderen.be).

Developing a gender-sensitive approach to school-to-work transitions is also underlined as a priority area by the Horizontal Integrations and Equal Opportunities Policy Plan (integratiebeleid.vlaanderen.be). Addressing gender biases at work as well as promoting childcare as a shared responsibility between both parents are examples of some of the underlined targets.

4.1.3. Education action plans

Within schools, campaigns that serve to raise awareness on forced marriages as well as female genital mutilation serve to empower vulnerable groups in society when it comes to gender-based violence and discrimination. In Flanders, the Sexuality and Policy Framework trains teachers and counsellors on how to protect the sexual integrity of minors. Within sports and youth clubs, one of the themes, i.e. 'violence and its many faces', promotes gender equality in informal educational institutions. To ensure coordinated multi-agency cooperation, a public inventory has been designed with information on training schemes on the topic of gender-based violence. Belgium has also played its part in implementing the 2013 EU project 'Form a Chain to Protect Children', where blended learning is used to provide training to law enforcement officers on how to better protect children from violence and abuse (EUCPN).

Within secondary education, integrating participatory citizenship into the Flemish curriculum in Flanders with a focus on peaceful coexistence is a key aim. This intends to be operationalized through the key competence area of 'citizenship and coexistence competences' (*burgerschapscompetenties met inbegrip van competenties inzake samenleven* in Dutch) introduced in secondary education. The 2021-2024 policy plan identifies several tools to achieve this, including the adoption of a gender sensitive approach to education. For instance, teachers are trained on gender roles and on stereotypes which manifest into gender-based violence.

4.2 Sexual orientation

4.2.1. European Union

The EU has been an advocate for the rights of the LGBT+ community. For instance, the Employment Equality Directive protects LGBTQ+³ people from discrimination based on sexual orientation in the workplace, and in 2021, Member States were required to report their application of the rights covered by the Directive (EC, 2020). The Gender Equality Directive ensures that people, regardless of sex or gender, are given equal opportunities and treated equally in the workplace in terms of pay, access to employment, working conditions, and social security benefits (EC, 2020). In terms of efforts made towards tackling inequality in education in the EU, the European Commission has taken several initiatives. An expert group will be set up to develop and implement strategies to design learning environments that are inclusive and supportive of all children regardless of gender and sexual orientation (EC, 2020). Both academic and non-academic concerns will be addressed such as underachievement, bullying, and harassment. Addressing the lack of research on intersectionality of the lived and living experiences of the LGBTI+ community, Horizon Europe will dedicate attention to gender studies and intersectional research. The Erasmus+ program continues to engage in projects that target empowerment of young members of the LGBT+ community and will further expand its outreach to ensure accessibility to those with fewer opportunities. Such schemes will be multi-faceted, whereby attention will be paid towards adopting financially accessible flexible programs (EC, 2020). The European Commission aims to support Member States in designing national plans on equality for LGBT+ people, to legally protect victims of gender and sex-based discrimination as well as ensure that LGBTQ children have access to education that is safe and inclusive (EC, 2020). These efforts hope that by 2025, the EU's gender and sexual diversity ecosystem is socially, structurally, legally, and educationally healthier.

Despite the progress made in the EU concerning rights for the LGBT+ community, prejudice and discrimination based on gender and sexual identity persist. According to the LGBTIQ⁴ Equality Strategy 2020- 2025 report by the European Commission (EC, 2020), 53 % of members of the LGBT+ community never or rarely openly address their gender and sexual identity and 38% have been subjected to harassment over the past twelve months. Only 21% of harassment victims report the violence. As discussed in Danish (2009), the most common form of abuse targeting members of the LGBTQ community is verbal abuse and within an educational context, through bullying. The danger in this lies in that verbal abuse is void of physical marks, yet the invisible scars it marks its victims by is a cause for taking action that is not just reactive but pre-emptive.

4.2.2. In Belgium

Homosexuality has never been a crime in Belgium. Same-sex marriage was legalized in 2003 and homosexuals gained the right of adopting children in 2006 (Danish, 2009). The findings from the European EDGE project (De Witte & Holz, 2013) exploring education and gender, identified Belgium as a country with a tolerance towards homosexuality. ILGA Europe

³ The Employment Equality Directive refers to the abbreviation LGBTIQ+ as opposed to the abbreviation LGBT+ adopted by this text

⁴ The abbreviation LGBTIQ is used as opposed to the abbreviation LGBT+ adopted by this text given that this is the official name given to the Equality Strategy by the European Commission

provided an overview of the human rights situation of the LGBT+⁵ community across Belgium in 2020 (ILGA Europe, 2020), and it shed light on several strides taken in the country within the realm of inclusivity of the LGBT+ community. For example, on 30 March, the parliament added sex characteristics to the 2007 legislation on gender equality (ILGA Europe, 2020).

However, the conversations around inclusivity for the LGBT+ community have not been quietened in Flanders, given the persistence of challenges. Based on the 2017 Flemish School Climate survey, around 41% of LGBT+ pupils feel unsafe, 26.8% are subjected to physical violence and 43% are sexually harassed. A report dating back to 2009 by the Danish Institute for Human Rights highlighted that discrimination towards LGBT+ students is largely invisible, and that risks for the abuse and unequal treatment go unnoticed. Several schemes have since been designed and implemented in Flanders to tackle the problem.

The Zzzip project, discussed in Pirotte et al. (2018), was conducted in 2010 and it looked at the quality of life of the LGBT+ community in Flanders, with a heterosexual sample as the control group. While the participants may not have been representative of the population in Flanders given their high education levels and their ethnic background being Belgian, conclusions can be drawn regarding different elements of the quality of life of the LGBT+ population. Within the schools, 17.7% of LGBT+ groups reported experiencing sexual discrimination. Regarding mental health, LGBT+ people were more prone to depression and suicide due to stressors such as discrimination because of sexual orientation, stigma around their sexual identities, and homonegativity. The study also found that LGBT+ people are more likely than the heterosexual groups to use tobacco, drugs, and alcohol, suggesting a lack of support available to them. The study further shed light on the poor quality of life of LGBT+ groups, particularly in terms of family life and mental health.

The book *'Somewhere over the rainbow. Discussions on homosexuality in education across Europe'* by De Witte, Holz, and Geunis (2018) provide an overview of the topic across eight different countries including Belgium. As the first qualitative study on perceptions towards homosexuality across eight countries including Belgium, the work of De Witte et al. (2018) serves as an important contribution for practice, policy, and research around inclusivity in education. Teachers, students, and parents were surveyed on their views towards homosexuality and it was found that negative attitudes persist in the educational context. For instance, negative perceptions towards homosexuality were frequent amongst male students and teachers.

The study also found that teachers in the countries studied were more likely to have positive perceptions towards homosexuality than their pupils. If teachers are important agents for socialization of pupils, this finding underlines the importance of programs aimed at enhancing the understanding and acceptance of sexual diversity amongst teachers. In a study by De Brauwere (2002), 37% of LGB teachers were reluctant to talk about their sexual orientation with their students and 45% did not discuss it with the school principal. However, 82% opened up with at least one colleague. Over a decade later, in the chapter titled *Being Gay in Belgium* by De Witte et al.'s (2018), similar trends continue to persist in Flanders. While a gay female teacher's experiences of being open about her sexual orientation "not to be a so-called role model, but just to be [...her] normal self" (p. 54) is indicative of progress, most teachers are hesitant to talk about their sexual orientation with their students due to fearing negative reactions. However, mirroring the findings from De Brauwere (2002), teachers are often more open towards colleagues (Pirotte et al. 2018). As core elements of the school, it is crucial that teachers are not left in the margins of conversations around inclusivity in education but are considered as a crucial part of it.

⁵ This text uses the abbreviation LGBT+ when referring to non-heterosexual groups unless the authors are quoting, citing, or referencing an organization, policy document, or initiative which adopts a different abbreviation.

4.2.3 Sexual orientation in education

Sexual diversity is woven into the fabric of the Belgian education system whereby sexual identity and orientation serve as attainment targets in the Flemish curricula at the secondary school level (De Witte et al. 2018). While schools are free to outline their mission and vision based on their pedagogical projects, schools are required to discuss sexual identity in the classroom as part of the cross-curricular attainment target of mental health. Students' individual well-being is highlighted whereby they are required to "accept and process their sexual development and changes during puberty", as well as considering the well-being of peers through "express[ing] and respectfully deal[ing] with friendship, being loved, sexual identity and orientation, sexual feelings and behaviour" (Voet, 2010). Schools will therefore be required to demonstrate active action taken with regards to inclusivity for LGBT+ students and staff. While Hilde Crevits, former Flemish Minister of Education (2014-2019), highlighted the extent to which Flemish education policy is inclusive and tolerant towards all students regardless of gender and sexual orientation, bullying persists amongst the LGBT+ student community (as cited in De Witte et al. 2018). This necessitates for action to ensure that the school remains a safe and inclusive space for all.

Given that the majority of students in Flanders attend Catholic schools, it is important to shed light on how the curricula in Catholic schools caters towards tolerance of difference in sexual orientation. As discussed in Pirotte et al. (2018), emphasis is placed on the development of inter-ideological competences. These include learning to live with differences, dealing with differences, loving and being loved, and love and friendship. In a teacher training program at KU Leuven, schemes were drawn to enhance subject teachers' capacity to facilitate this inter-ideological dialogue. Drawn from the work of Pollefeyt (2002), teachers in training explored questions such as the extent to which homosexuality is a choice, the stereotypes around homosexuals, and perceptions of homosexuality in different cultural and religious contexts.

Iterbeke and De Witte (2020) assessed the impact of an educational programme geared towards cultivating more positive attitudes towards homosexuality in 474 secondary school students in the Netherlands. The short-term effectiveness of the program is noteworthy whereby negative attitudes towards homosexuality were lessened, particularly in the nine-hour educational programme. Although the long-term impact of the programme seemed to diminish, students nevertheless became more at ease with concerns around homosexuality. Iterbeke and De Witte shed an important light on the potential of inclusive educational curricula in having a ripple effect on society's attitudes and behaviour towards differences in sexual orientation.

4.2.4. Actions and action plans

Several Flemish organisations have been at the forefront in their efforts towards inclusivity regarding the difference in sexual orientation in an inclusive and accepting society. Unia, an independent public institution, fights discrimination against *difference*. In 2002, it established the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men to promote equality based on gender and sexual orientation. The institution has a wide reach, working against discrimination in the labour market, politics, and education through its legal unit which aids victims free of charge. It provides a safe space for those facing prejudice because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. It addresses concerns on wage gaps, transgender issues, sexism, and sexual harassment, as well as engaging in research and providing access to publications that explore gender and sex related concerns.

Çavaria assumes the role of an umbrella organisation for Flemish LGBT+ organisations. Its projects range from lobbying to community work, to awareness campaigns, and to establishing a hotline for LGBT+ community members. Çavaria's reach stretches from professionals working on LGBT+ concerns, to businesses, law enforcement officers, and

education staff. Given that the scope of this chapter is narrowed down to the educational context, attention is paid on Çavaria's work within the realm of education.

The organisation has taken several educational initiatives to raise awareness on gender and sexual inclusivity. For instance, it provides a free Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and webinars on diversity and childhood which sheds light on gender-based violence which LGBT+ children and youth encounter. The course is available in English and open for all. It aims to familiarise learners with terms related to gender and sexual diversity, develop an understanding of violence against LGBT+ youth, and identify ways to tackle violence (*çavaria.be*). The organisation is run by paid staff and volunteers and serves as a movement; an interest group which lobbies and places concerns of the LGBT+ community on political and public agendas, and as a centre of expertise engaging in research regarding LGBT+ concerns (*çavaria.be*). Çavaria also advocates for equal opportunities for the LGBT+ community, for their physical, mental, and social well-being, and for connecting the LGBT+ community with the wider Flemish community. Çavaria embraces a participatory culture, encouraging individuals to take a proactive approach towards addressing gender and sex-based violence.

Çavaria organises 'B Curious', which is an annual event around sexual fluidity. They also organise the SPARKLE annual party in which the Çavaria Awards are presented. One of its recent projects implemented in 2020 is School's Out, which provides ways in which schools can become more inclusive and tolerant spaces.

In 2019, the project 'Diversity and Childhood' (DaC) funded by the European Commission, was implemented by Çavaria. It aims to instil values embracing gender diversity in children and youth. Actions have comprised of projects which design training courses and seminars aimed at LGBTI inclusion, in addition to MOOCs which aims at educating participants on gender and sex-based violence. Currently, an application for mobile devices is being designed whereby 6- to 18-year-old users can access FAQ on matters around gender and sexual diversity. Drawing from Çavaria's research-oriented mindset, a free online handbook has been designed as part of the DaC project with information on topics concerning the LGBT+ community.

Another initiative taken by Çavaria is KILQ. KILQ functions as the organisation's education and training centre and provides professional training for teachers through educational material discussing gender and sexual identity. KILQ's outreach gradually expanded towards focusing on the Flemish educational system in a bid to identify opportunities for change and implement reforms at the wider structural and institutional level. To do so, greater attention was given to stakeholders within schools including publishers and school boards. As a non-profit organization, KILQ provides education to businesses, organizations, and educational institutions on ensuring that work and learning spaces are inclusive. KILQ offers answers to concerns around accessibility of schools to LGBT+ students, workplace support LGBT+ employees, inclusive selection by human resource managers, and gender neutral communication strategies within businesses and educational institutions.

5 Supporting data from Flanders

This section presents the results of the questionnaire completed by 150 university students and 76 instructors working in education in Flanders, Belgium. The questionnaire, completed between April 2021 and February 2022 by students and staff from different faculties across higher education institutions in Flanders, explores the perceptions of students and staff on five different dimensions of diversity: cultural awareness, ethnic background, sexual preference, gender, and disability. Each dimension includes between six to eight indicators which provide statements that seek to understand respondents' perceptions of differences in relation to their learning and working environments. Respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 0 – 5, the extent to which they agreed/disagreed with each of the statements (0 n/a, 1 strongly disagree, 2

disagree, 3 neutral, 4 agree, 5 strongly agree). Demographic data was also collected in addition to data on whether instructors were aware of the formalities for reporting different forms of discrimination within their universities (0 no idea, 1 no, 2 yes).

5.1 Data from higher education students

5.1.1 Cultural awareness and ethnic background

First, we will consider the indicator ‘cultural awareness’ which is an average of the following three sub-indicators: ‘*The instructors at my university adequately address multicultural issues in their classes*’, ‘*My instructors try to provide opportunities for activities related to cultural awareness*’, and ‘*My instructors are comfortable working/studying with colleagues/students of different cultural backgrounds*’. The mode on this indicator is 4 and the mean 3.46, suggesting that the majority of respondent students agree that their education environments are inclusive of cultural differences. The cultural awareness of the students seems to be lower than in the other surveyed countries (Greece, Poland and Turkey).

There are, however, also significant differences with students experiencing very inclusive and exclusive cultural differences. For the indicator ‘*My instructors seem comfortable discussing cultural issues in the classroom*’, the mean of the responses was (3.34) and the mode was 4, with the majority of students agreeing that instructors are comfortable of discussing cultural topics. Parallels can be drawn between students’ responses to the aforementioned statement and the responses from the instructors for the indicator *I feel comfortable working/studying with colleagues/students of different cultural backgrounds* where the mean response was (4.34).

5.1.2 Sexual preference and gender

Next, we will look at the composite indicator on ‘sexual preference’. It is composed of six questions: ‘My instructors offer equal learning opportunities to gay and heterosexual students’; ‘Any mentions of the word “homosexuality” makes my instructors feel uncomfortable’; ‘According to my instructors homosexuals affect the University’s reputation negatively.’; ‘According to my instructors homo and heterosexuals have the same learning-working habits.’; ‘I think my instructors would feel comfortable having a homosexual student.’; and ‘According to my instructors homosexuality is a psychological disorder and requires therapy.’. Overall, we observe potential for improvement in this indicator. The mean on this composite indicator is 3.46, which is lower than in the other countries.

However, discrimination based on sexual orientation appears minimal in Flemish higher education, according to the responses from students. For instance, for the indicator ‘*My instructors offer equal learning opportunities to gay and heterosexual students*’, students’ mode response was ‘agree’ and the mean was (3.80). For the indicator ‘*According to my instructors homosexuality is a psychological disorder and requires therapy*’, 112 out of 150 students responded either ‘strongly disagree’ or ‘disagree.’.

In terms of gender equality in the classroom, the results were promising. For the indicator ‘*My instructors treat students equally, regardless of their gender*’, the mean of the responses was (4.06).

5.1.3 Disability

The ‘disability indicator’ is composed from the following statements: ‘*My instructors treat students with a disability as if they have no feelings.*’; ‘*My instructors have knowledge and*

skills to educate students with disabilities.’; *‘My instructors are willing to adjust their teaching to support students with disabilities.’*; *‘My instructors are comfortable working with students with disabilities.’*; *‘According to my instructors students with disabilities should be educated in separate classes.’*; *‘Students with disabilities are a burden on the educational system.’*; *‘My instructors become impatient with disabled students.’*; and *‘My instructors don’t expect too much from disabled students.’* Overall, with a mean of 3.99, the Flemish respondents react similarly to the respondents in other countries.

In general, the relatively lower means of student responses for the disability indicators show that Flemish higher education can ensure to provide further support to instructors within this domain. The responses from the instructors, found in the following section, also reflect similar perceptions. For the indicator *‘My instructors have knowledge and skills to educate students with disabilities’*, the mode response was 3 and the mean was (2.38). When it comes to providing differentiated instruction to students with disabilities, the indicator *‘My instructors are willing to adjust their teaching to support students with disabilities’* reported a mean response of (2.72). Upon provision of special needs training to instructors or the introduction of co-teaching together with teachers or instructors who have specialized in special needs education, better differentiated instruction can be integrated in Flemish higher education.

5.2 Data from higher education instructors

5.2.1 Cultural awareness and ethnic background

For the higher education instructors, we aggregate the different indicators for the scale ‘cultural awareness’ for the sample of instructors who participated in the survey in a similar way as for the students. With a mean score of 4.04, the results show very similar findings to the other studied countries (although a bit lower than among the Greece and Turkey respondents).

The analysis of the survey items for the cultural awareness indicator showed that the statement *‘I feel comfortable working/studying with colleagues/students of different cultural backgrounds’* had the highest mean of all indicators for this scale (4.34). This suggests that in general, the instructors surveyed feel comfortable within a multicultural higher educational environment. Similarly, the indicator for ethnic background, *‘I feel comfortable when I am in the company of people from different ethnic backgrounds’* also displayed a high mean of (4.25), which was the highest amongst the indicators for ethnic background. In terms of instructors’ understanding of differences in behaviour due to ethnic differences, 42 out of 76 instructors responded ‘agree’ to the item *‘I understand why students of other ethnic backgrounds act differently’*. The indicator *‘During group discussions or exercises, I make efforts to ensure all students are included regardless of their cultural backgrounds’* had the second highest mean (3.67) while the responses for the indicator *‘I try to provide opportunities for activities related to cultural awareness’* had a mean of (2.10). This indicates that support may need to be given to Flemish higher education staff in terms of the provision of teaching material and activities that raise cultural awareness in the working and learning environments. For the indicator *‘I am concerned about racial inequality in education’*, the mode response was ‘agree’ with 35 out of 76 instructors.’ This highlights the importance of addressing racial inequality within the Flemish higher education system which the majority of the surveyed instructors agree is existent. However, there are slight differences between the aforementioned data and the responses from students for the indicator *‘My instructors are concerned about racial inequality in education’*, whereby the mean was (2.80). Thus, while instructors may believe that there are racial inequalities in education, this perception is not visible to students.

According to the demographic data collected in this survey, almost 70% of instructors have never lived abroad for longer than 6 months. International mobility programs for staff may help in the acquisition of intercultural literacy and understanding alongside participation in courses on cultural and ethnic diversity. With Flanders’ growing cultural and ethnic diversity,

these are competences which, if prioritized, can help make Flemish higher education more inclusive.

5.2.2 Sexual preference and gender

Next, consider the results of the aggregation of the different indicators for the scales ‘sexual preference and ‘gender’ for the sample of instructors who participated in the survey. Both indicators are negatively skewed, which indicates that in general, perceptions towards differences in sexual preferences and gender are positive. The demographic data revealed that in Flanders, 62% of instructors have family or friends with sexual preferences which are different from their own. This may partially explain the general positive perceptions towards those of different sexual preferences.

Overall, instructors within higher education in Flanders displayed a high level of awareness and understanding of differences in sexual preferences. The mean responses for all indicators were above 4.0, with the exception of indicator ‘*Homosexuals affect the University’s reputation negatively*’ which instructors mainly responded with ‘strongly disagree’ with only 9 out of 76 respondents responding otherwise. The mean response for the indicator ‘*Students should be treated equally, regardless of their gender*’ was (4.93) which showcases a high level of perceptions of gender equality in Flanders. In terms of labour market outlook, 5 instructors responded ‘strongly disagree’ for the indicator ‘*Some jobs/departments are not appropriate for females to study*’. Similarly, the mode of the responses for another gender indicator related to gender roles ‘*For females, marriage is more important than education*’, was also ‘strongly disagree.’ These results showcase that in Flanders, most instructors display favourable attitudes when it comes to gender roles in adulthood. In terms of the indicator ‘*I consider specific interests and needs of males and females*’, the mean was (2.43) with the majority of instructors responding ‘neutral.’ This may indicate that there is some awareness of males and females having different learning needs, strengths and weaknesses in higher education which, instructors may choose to consider while teaching however this awareness is neither strong nor weak.

5.2.3 Disability

The data from instructors regarding the indicators for disabilities suggest that there is room for improvement in Flemish higher educational institutions. For the indicator ‘*I have knowledge and skills to educate students with disabilities*’, the mean of responses was (2.63), with the majority of instructors responding with ‘disagree.’ This demonstrates that there is a gap in instructors’ knowledge when it comes to teaching and working with special needs students. This contrasts with the responses for the indicator ‘*I feel comfortable working with students with disabilities*’ where the data showed that 49 out of 76 instructors responded with ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree.’ Thus, although instructors feel comfortable working with special needs students, they do not feel that they have the competence to do so effectively and maximise special needs students’ learning needs. It should be noted that almost 58% of instructors do not have anyone in their family or close surroundings with disabilities which may have contributed to their gaps in knowledge of working with special needs students.

For the indicator ‘*I think students with disabilities should be educated in separate classes*’, the mean was (1.90). Only two instructors responded ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’. The majority disagreed with this statement, which indicated that in Flanders, segregation is not favoured in higher education. A favourable environment in higher education in terms of instructors’ perceptions is further displayed through the responses for the indicators ‘*I tend to become impatient with disabled students*’ and ‘*I don’t expect too much from disabled students*’ which has means of (1.28) and (1.66) respectively.

5.2.4 Additional insights

Further general insights from the data from instructors and students show that, on average, around 60% of instructors and 70% of students are unaware of the procedures for reporting discrimination of all forms on their campuses. These insights suggest the need for higher education institutions to ensure that policies for tackling discrimination are developed, implemented, and disseminated to both students and staff. This would not only disincentivize discrimination, but it would also ensure that when discrimination occurs, victims report them rather than stay silent. As suggested in Table 1, we do not observe any gender differences.

Table 1: *Scales level and gender of instructors – Belgium group*

	female (n = 44)		male (n = 31)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>		Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Cultural awareness	4.04	0.67	4.05	0.55	-0.11	.915	-0.31	0.28	0.03
Ethnic background	4.02	0.51	3.95	0.42	0.64	.522	-0.15	0.29	0.15
Sexual preference	4.72	0.39	4.76	0.32	-0.53	.599	-0.22	0.13	0.12
Gender	4.54	0.39	4.35	0.53	1.82	.073	-0.02	0.41	0.43
Disability	3.95	0.61	3.85	0.40	0.85	.396	-0.13	0.33	0.19

Conclusion

This chapter surveyed the landscape on educational inclusivity within Flanders. There is a strong history of policies, initiatives, and measures that are governing the way in which diversity and inclusivity of learners are understood, framed, and accommodated for within the realm of Flemish education. Although this chapter mainly touched upon education as its context for discussion around diversity and inclusivity, it is paramount to note that inclusivity and diversity are not only embedded within how people learn, but also how people work and live. The domains of leisure, healthcare, and digital media are therefore also touched upon.

The focus of the first section was on the education system's accommodation of learners from different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. The second section focused on the accommodation of learners with disabilities and special needs. The third section focused on educational inclusivity of learners in terms of differences in gender and sexual orientation. The final section presented the results of a questionnaire among higher education students and teachers.

Flanders has a high level of inequality in educational outcomes between immigrants and natives. This has prompted Flemish education bodies to take initiatives that enhance the opportunities for learners from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. The 'Agency for Integration' and the 'Equal Opportunities Policy Plan 2020-2024' have been at the forefront of such efforts and serve as roadmaps for educational integration of newcomers to Flanders from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Better monitoring and evaluation schemes of

policies, a focus on participatory citizenship, the introduction of new competences in education which assess students' understanding of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity, Dutch language classes, in addition to setting up digital and non-digital platforms through which discrimination can be addressed are all examples of current schemes. The measures for enhancing inclusivity target not only learners but also educators, in addition to expanding beyond education and onto the broader domains of leisure and the labour market.

Strides have also been taken for better inclusion of learners with disabilities and special needs. While the M-decree lay the foundations of Flanders' inclusive education policy within the realm of learners with special academic and non-academic needs, its trajectory of 'first promoting mainstream education for all' has been replaced by the new Decree on Learning Support which strives towards a different approach of 'special education if needed and inclusive (mainstream) education if possible'. The new decree focuses on improving the quality of special education in addition to providing mainstream education with structural, pedagogical, and financial support for students with disabilities. These support schemes range from co-teaching projects, CLBs, and fostering mobility between mainstream and special education.

The scope of this chapter on educational inclusivity in Flanders also expanded to gender differences and diversity in sexual orientation. The 'Horizontal Integration and Equal Opportunities Policy Plan 2020-2024' sheds light on the importance of tackling gender-based violence and promoting social inclusion of all gender and sexual orientation groups within education as well as the labour market. Of particular concern are women from immigrant backgrounds who often have no or foreign qualifications which hamper their education and labour market prospects. For LGBT+ groups, organizations such as Cavaria have spearheaded an inclusive environment for learners from the aforementioned groups. Addressing bullying of LGBT+ pupils and teachers, encouraging openness, dialogue, and equal educational and employment opportunities have prepared the ground for a discrimination-free education atmosphere for those identifying as homosexual or transgender.

Understanding educational inclusivity in Flanders against the background of the policies, measures, and initiatives that are catering for learner diversity paves the road towards enhancing inclusivity. This chapter seeks to kindle a conversation around embracing learner diversity as an opportunity for living, learning, and working peacefully in coexistence with *others* who may appear to be different but are in fact the same as *us*.

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